

Big Society

Summary

This report on Big Society is being tabled as an emergency item following the unexpected announcement of four vanguard communities on 19 July.

This short report provides an overview of the thinking behind and commitments in the coalition government's plans for Big Society. It sets out what is already in development within the LG Group, including a strong strand of work within the RSG bid and proposes lobbying priorities to be pursued by the LG Group at official and political level.

Recommendations

The Improvement Board notes the content and ensures that the LG Group works closely with the vanguard authorities and CLG to ensure any new models of service delivery are sector led.

The Board agree to pursue the lobbying points at paragraph 11.

Action

To be agreed as a result of members' discussion.

Big Society

Background

1. The paper, **Big Society not Big Government** sets out the Government's vision for change. The paper sets out a number of actions to achieve the aim of a society where the main force for progress is social responsibility rather than state control.
2. The three strands of the Big Society agenda are:
 - **Social action**
 - **Public services reform**
 - **Community empowerment**
3. Activities to realise the vision are currently being worked on within government and will form the framework for the proposed **Localism and Decentralisation Bill**. At present these include:
 - Strengthening and supporting social enterprises and social action, including the creation of a Big Society Bank from dormant bank accounts
 - Stimulating the creation and development of neighbourhood groups who in turn will be able to bid to take over running community amenities, such as parks and libraries, will be given the right of first refusal to buy state-owned community assets and run others, such as pubs and post offices; start their own schools and genuinely engage in local planning. Neighbourhood grants will be provided for the poorest areas and a National Centre for Community Organiser training will be established.
 - Culture change to help build the Big Society will include devolution of more powers to local councils, and the creation of a National Citizen's Service for 16 year olds. The civil service will be transformed into a civic service.
4. The techniques to achieve these changes have been identified by government as: **decentralisation, transparency and providing finance**.
5. To co-ordinate the work across government departments, a Big Society group is being chaired by Francis Maude MP, with a named Big Society Minister in each department. Lord Wei has been appointed as the government adviser on Big Society.
6. To take forward the decentralisation "techniques", four **vanguard communities** were announced by the Prime Minister on 19 July: Eden Valley in Cumbria; Windsor and Maidenhead; , LB Sutton and Liverpool. These areas will work on a variety of initiatives (devolving budgets to street level, developing local

transport services, taking over local assets, piloting open-source planning and building volunteer programmes). Officials from CLG and other government departments will support them and help break down barriers.

7. **Local Government and Big Society:** The new government's statements on the "Big Society", "radical devolution" and "welfare reform" are redrawing the landscape for local government at a rapid pace. The combination of significant cuts in funding, new freedoms and the likelihood of a General Power of Competence are offering the prospect of fundamental change in local government. There is an important link to be made between Big Society and Place Based Budgets.
8. **Current LGA/LG Improvement and Development programmes** that are relevant to the debate include the Partnership Improvement Programme, (LB Sutton was an exemplar of the programme), Third Sector Commissioning (which includes development of social enterprises), and the Community Empowerment Programme. LGID has a team of accredited and expert voluntary sector and community empowerment peers.
9. **LG Improvement and Development** grasped the seriousness of the reforms and arranged a "hot topic" fringe on Big Society and a workshop on alternative models for service delivery at the LGA conference and has been working with the Centre for Social Justice to scope a programme which will support local authorities within this policy area; the Improvement Board will be asked to discuss this emerging programme and the policy implications for local government. Internal LG Improvement and Development discussions have also taken place with Leadership, Equalities, Planning and Community Engagement colleagues to ensure the policy direction is consistent, and the emerging Productivity Programme and RSG bid will both include Big Society as an important theme.

Lobbying priorities

10. On one level, the Big Society is all about what councils do, although it is recognized that different councils handle this issue in different ways.. LGA Office Holders agreed a general approach before the election. This approach was to find a way of signaling that councils are, and have for some time, been in favour of developing greater civil society - albeit in many places not calling it that. Nevertheless there remains a need to steer this initiative so that it could positively add to what councils are trying to do.
11. In particular, in terms of lobbying:
 - (i) some civil servants are pushing the idea that this initiative reduces the need for place-based budgets, and suggesting the creation of "neighbourhood" budgets convened by the CLG civil servants. This is counter-intuitive to localism in terms of Whitehall involvement.

(ii) similarly, officials have a weak track record in removing bureaucratic barriers created by other departments. We should instead argue in favour of councils acting as advocate on behalf of their residents, including the scope the General Power of Competence.

(iii) there is a set of unanswered questions about how the ambitions for communities to take over services will work. For example, we are working with DfT to explore what that department sees as strong legal barriers to councils taking over bus services – so how then would communities overcome these hurdles without support from a body such as a council?

It is recommended that we pursue all these lobbying points promptly, both at official and political level.

Financial Implications

There are no additional financial implications arising from this report.

Implications for Wales

There are no specific implications for Wales

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